Crisis Manager

To Move a Nation
by Roger Hilsman.
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The decision to escalate the Vietnam War was not made in 1965. It was made in 1964. It was certainly made within six months of President Kennedy's death. It may even have been made within six weeks of his death.

Several writers have speculated that the Johnson Administration decided to send ground troops against the South and fighter bombers against the North long before either the Tonkin crisis of August, 1964 or the Pleiku raid of February, 1965. Franz Schurmann found a hint to this effect in Johnson's 1964 New Year's message to the South Vietnamese Government, and I.F. Stone has gradually assembled an impressive case that the fundamental decisions were made in the same year.[1] But even one's material, persuasive though it rested ultimately on the debatable belief that events which appeared on the surface to be linked in a deliberate pattern of escalation were in fact so linked by the Government. We need no longer doubt it. Roger Hilsman, Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs, 1963-4, self-confessed member of the Kennedy "inner circle" and the latest of the JFK entourage to commit his public service to the public record, tells us more even than we need to know in order to clinch the case.

According to Hilsman's account the Kennedy Administration was fundamentally divided by the crises in Laos and Vietnam. One faction—Harriman, Hilsman, the State Department (minus Rusk), the President himself—favored what Hilsman calls the "political" approach. As did their "military" opposite numbers, these men believed that the insurgencies in South Vietnam and Laos were ultimately attributable to North Vietnamese direction, arms, and personnel. But they believed nevertheless that this threat could best be curbed by limiting the application of American power within the borders of Laos and South Vietnam. In Laos this meant using the neutralist faction led by Souvanna Phouma and the international community led by the Soviet Union to keep the left-wing Pathet Lao at bay. This "political" approach did not prohibit the use of American "advisers" in the Lao Army and Air Force nor did it even preclude sending regular US units to fight within the Kingdom of Laos; it merely hoped, in the event US soldiers had to be sent, to limit their numbers to a few thousand and their mission to protecting the Mekong River system.

The same emphasis on limited objectives and limited use of American forces carried over to Vietnam. Because South Vietnam had no Souvanna Phouma that Washington was aware of—never having looked for one—different tactics had to be used. The favored policy was to give unlimited political support to the governmental apparatus of South Vietnam while trying to limit our support of Diem and his entourage. Since Diem countered by placing the administrative reins more and more in his own, and Nhu's, hands Washington's policy of splitting its support never quite worked out. In any case our military effort was to be limited to South Vietnam, US soldiers were to be limited to an "advisory" role, and US fliers on combat missions were to have only limited visibility to the public. If US units had to be sent to keep South Vietnam "free," their numbers and their role, as in Laos, were to be limited as well.

THE "MILITARY ADVOCATES" within the Kennedy Administration were more numerous by far than their opposites and, as we have since learned to our dismay, more long-lived as well. They included Secretaries Rusk and McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff led by their Chairman Maxwell Taylor, Presidential Assistant Walt W. Rostow, and the then Vice President, Lyndon Johnson. With Rostow as their ideologue they insisted that the Indochina crisis was attributable to North Vietnamese aggression, and that it could be resolved only by meeting Hanoi head on, accepting the naked challenge with an open American response, and by striking directly at the "source of aggression." Thus they constantly urged the introduction of regular American forces, bombing of the North, and a policy which promised to obscure what Hilsman and his colleagues thought were the critical differences between the internal situation of Laos and South Vietnam.

There were other views within the Kennedy Administration, but they never constitute a faction. The Undersecretary of State for Economic Affairs, George Ball, opposed even the limited involvement pressed by the "political" faction and stressed the danger that the US would be sucked into a major intervention in Vietnam. The principal Undersecretary of State, Chester Bowles, had the temerity at one point to suggest that all of Southeast Asia be neutralized. Ball's advice was considered and rejected by both factions but Bowles's proposal was dismissed as "imaginative," "far-seeing," and premature, and Bowles himself, who wasn't considered tough-minded enough for the higher levels of the Kennedy Administration, was later exiled to a lesser post.

The dispute opened in April, 1961 when Johnson returned from an Asian inspection trip and recommended "a major effort" in South Vietnam. "Essentially the same" recommendations were put forward in October of the same year by the Taylor-Rostow mission to Vietnam. Taylor proposed sending a force of 10,000 US regulars to fight in South Vietnam as the vanguard of an expeditionary corps which, he foresaw—and accepted—even then, would possibly have to exceed 300,000 men. Rostow proposed bombing North Vietnam "... a course of action for which [he] was a responsible advocate on this and subsequent occasions." President Kennedy rejected the qualitative changes being proposed, just as he had in April, but did direct that plans be prepared to introduce US troops in the event it proved necessary. He also accepted the Taylor-Rostow recommendations for increases in aid to Diem and for a build-up of American advisers.

For almost two years the Kennedy Administration remained in this compromise stance. The dispute between the two factions was muted by the success of US-sponsored counter-insurgency tactics in Vietnam and by the collaboration of the Soviet Union in leading the Pathet Lao to join in a coalition regime with the neutralists and the right-wing. But in late 1963 these gains began to wear thin, especially in Vietnam, as first the NLF and then the Buddhists started to succeed in their assaults against the Diem regime. After Diem's murder on November 2, 1963 the NLF commenced several months of vigorous campaigning which rapidly undid its earlier losses.

Definitive evidence of this change in fortune had not yet begun to reach

[1] Schurmann in *The Politics of Escalation* and Stone in *I. F. Stone's Weekly*, April 27, June 8, and October 12, 1964, May 17 and December 6, 1965, and September 26, October 24, and December 5, 1966.